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IMPLICATIONS OF LANGUAGE PROCESSES FOR THE TEACHER.

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THE SCIENCE OF LINGUISTICS CAN, IF INTELLIGENTLY APPLIED, AID THE TEACHER OF ENGLISH IN CONVINCING STUDENTS THAT LANGUAGE IS A MEDIUM THEY CAN CONTROL BY LEARNING ABOUT ITS STRUCTURE. KNOWLEDGE OF THE PROCESSES BY WHICH CHILDREN LEARN LANGUAGE WILL LEAD ENGLISH TEACHERS TO RECOGNIZE THE STRENGTH OF BEHAVIOR PATTERNS IN USAGE AND NONSTANDARD DIALECTS AND TO BE TOLERANT OF THEM SO THAT STUDENTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO ACCEPT AND USE THE STANDARD DIALECT. AN INSISTANCE UPON TIGHTNESS OF ORGANIZATION AND LOGIC IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING WILL MAKE MORE SENSE TO THE STUDENT IF TAUGHT AS A MEANS OF COMPENSATING FOR THE LACK OF SIGNALS FOR STRESS, PITCH, INTONATION, AND HESITATION IN WRITTEN LANGUAGE. FINALLY, AN UNDERSTANDING OF ANALOGY, THE CREATION OF COMPOUNDS AND DERIVATIVE FORMS, BACK FORMATION CLIPPING, AND WORD BLENDING CAN BE OF DIAGNOSTIC AID TO THE TEACHER, ENABLING HIM TO LEAD THE STUDENT TO AN INTELLIGENT AND COMFORTABLE UNDERSTANDING OF HOW LANGUAGE WORKS AND HOW IT CAN BE MANIPULATED EFFECTIVELY. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS, PROCEEDINGS OF THE SPRING INSTITUTES, 1963." CHAMPAIGN, ILL., NCTE, 1963.) (DL)

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Theoretical Background

IMPLICATIONS OF LANGUAGE PROCESSES FOR THE TEACHER

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Essentially Americans are pragmatic. We take relatively little pleasure in theory for its own sake. Before long, certainly, we are likely to ask where all this is leading and to what conceivable use it can be put. Since we have been spending the day discussing certain concepts and working methods basic to linguistic science, I am certain that these questions have occurred to you, not once but many times. I shall not attempt a full answer to them this evening, but I shall deal with the implications of certain language processes for the teacher of English.

In doing so, I find it most convenient to begin on a negative, or at least a cautious note. The reason for this lies in part in the strange circumstance that linguistics, after having been ignored by the language-teaching professions for so many years, is now in some danger of being oversold. Currently the expectations from it may be greater than the facts actually justify.

Using Linguistics: An Assessment

First of all, let me dispel any hope that a knowledge of the structure of English on the part of our pupils will solve any problems of motivation toward writing. The ability to expand noun modifiers will not provide any teacher with a bag of exciting theme topics or any students with the itch to enlarge upon any one of them. How do you get your students so steamed up, so excited that they are bursting to communicate, that their fingers itch for a pencil? Whatever the answer may be, I would be the last to claim that linguistics will provide it.

Furthermore, I doubt very much that linguistics as such will produce imaginative and original approaches to what are so frequently dull and time-worn topics for writing. The treatment of a theme topic is not likely to be much better than the topic itself, and this depends upon the originality and intellectual vigor of the teacher as much as anything else. He cannot expect, except within rather narrow limits, linguistics to breed a joy in playing with ideas.

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Finally, I do not believe that linguists are equipped at the present time to be of much help in analyzing or in furnishing guidance with respect to paragraph structure, to large-scale organization, or to matters of style. In general, linguistics has confined itself to the study of units no larger than the single utterance. It has done relatively little, except for Zellig Harris's occasional forays into discourse analysis, with larger blocks or stretches of language.

I make these caveats in the interest of caution. I have no intention whatsoever of denigrating a subject which interests me profoundly, one upon which I have spent a great share of my total academic effort, and one which I consider to be of vital importance in the study of mankind. I believe, however, that it is important for the English-teaching profession to see things in their proper proportion and not to place a false trust in linguistics, or in any other discipline for that matter.

Expectations for English Teachers

Having indicated some of the things which I do not believe linguistics is in a position to do, I shall approach the subject from another, somewhat more positive angle. Let us recognize realistically certain reasonable limits to what we as English teachers may hope to achieve in our lifetime, particularly with respect to language. Let us then try to visualize some of the situations implicit in this view of our subject and to see what this means with respect to the way in which we shall have to work.

Here again I must begin with a statement which is essentially negative. I doubt very much that we shall produce in our country and in this century a generation for whom distinguished prose is a natural mode of expression. Unfortunately, there are too many social and cultural factors working against us. Nor do I believe that we, in our time, shall succeed in developing a public whose taste in hailing the stylistically good and rejecting the stylistically bad is virtually instinctive, like the German and Italian reaction toward music or the French toward art. As a people we are essentially lacking in a sense of and an appreciation for prose style, and I see little possibility that this shortcoming will be remedied.

The best that we can hope for, and indeed this would be no small achievement if we succeeded in it, is to create a public taste for language that will demand directness, economy, clarity, and precision, a taste that will be impatient with blurred expression and fuzzy tautologies, one that will laugh jargon out of court. Let me repeat, even this would be a considerable improvement over the general level

of public taste at the present time. If it were accomplished, virtually every advertising writer and every political speaker would have to alter his mode of expression if he hoped to be taken at all seriously. The authors of most newspaper editorials would have to proceed about their business more cautiously than they do at present, and directors of public relations would be scouring the bushes for a new breed of writer.

If we are to accomplish this, we must convey to our students the attitude that the English language is a medium which is within their power to control if they learn enough about its behavior and structure. They must not look upon the language as a Procrustean bed into which they must fit, cut, and trim whatever they have to communicate. At this point my optimism begins. I believe that it is within our power to produce such an intelligently articulate generation. But if we are to do so, much will depend upon the attitude toward language which that generation encounters in the English classroom. It is at this point that language process, the topic of my address this evening, does enter into the picture.

Language as Evolution: The Teaching Process

Let us consider first the process of *transmission*. How is language passed on from one generation to another? The answer is simple. It is conveyed orally, from parent to child, reinforced by brothers and sisters, then playmates, and finally school. We must remember also that before the child ever enters kindergarten he has acquired virtually the entire sound system of the language, at least the regular inflectional patterns, if not all of the occasional departures from them, and the syntactic structures in their barest or minimal forms.

My purpose in reminding you of this is to prepare you for the basic point that I want to make here. There is no such thing as original sin, linguistically speaking. Children produce solecisms, such as the double negative or *me and him* as subject, neither from instinct nor native perversity. The departures from accepted usage which you in the classroom encounter in their language are not their creation. They are features of English which have been passed on to them by speakers of substandard dialects. We must remember also that for every sub- or nonstandard feature to which you object in their speech, they have acquired scores of patterns in which standard and nonstandard coincide. These do not attract your notice, but they represent language that has been learned, language that is acceptable.

There are two lessons to be gained from recognizing this. First, we must come to realize the degree to which such constructions as the double negative are rooted in linguistic tradition, although admittedly it represents a feature of current usage which we as English teachers do not and should not approve. Nevertheless this construction, spoken by one of your pupils, is simply the end product of a process of oral transmission through a dozen generations since double negation ceased to be standard English, and three times as many before that. Certainly I sympathize wholeheartedly with the attempt to eliminate these linguistic social class markers. Nevertheless, in order to do so, we must recognize the strength of the behavior patterns with which we are dealing. The second lesson to be gained from this is the suggestion that we shall accomplish far more by working positively rather than negatively; I shall have more to say about this later.

We must also recognize *diversification* as a linguistic process with implications for us. In general, the dialects of a language reflect both the vertical stratification of society and the horizontal and geographic spread of its regional cultures. In short, any language with a fair number of speakers is likely to have both regional and social dialects. We need not concern ourselves about the language processes which produce these dialects. For the most part they are the same processes which are involved in and account for diachronic change in the standard form of the language. But for us the implications of diversification as a language process are two-fold.

We must realize first of all that in every country at some time in the past, a combination of social, economic, and political circumstances gave prestige to what was in origin a particular regional dialect, elevating it to the position of a regional standard. This is what happened to the dialect of London in England, to the dialect of the Ile de France in France, to that of Florence in Italy, and to that of the province of Castille in Spain. It would be difficult to maintain that the linguistic resources of any of these dialects were inherently better or worse than those of any of the other regional dialects current at the time.

It follows, therefore, that as we teach the standard language, what we are doing in effect is to try to get the vast majority of our students to substitute this prestige dialect for the one which they have learned as children, and which they may continue to hear constantly in their out-of-school contacts. I grant that this is a somewhat unorthodox way of looking at English instruction, but from the point of view of the linguistic geographer it is quite justified.

In the United States at the present time the situation is even more complicated. Sociologists regularly characterize our society as upwardly mobile. In fact, many of them choose to think of our social structure as a continuum rather than a series of layers—a continuum, however, in which everyone recognizes his position relative to others. As a consequence, standard American English is nowhere nearly as clearly set off from the local patois or certain regional forms as is currently the case in France, Germany, or Italy. In fact, the standard language is by no means as clearly differentiated from other social dialects in America as it is in England. No American linguist could do for the English language in his country what Nancy Mitford attempted to do for the English of Great Britain in her book, *Noblesse Oblige,* namely to define a series of linguistic markers which unmistakably differentiated or identified a speaker as a member of the upper class.

For this reason any definition of the specific features of standard American English is bound to be difficult. A vast amount of disagreement as to what constitutes the standard is inevitable. In the past, teachers of English and writers of the textbooks which they use have tended to be far too censorious, too negative, too unrealistic. They have too often given the impression that a competent command of the standard language is virtually impossible to attain. If we are to deal with the language at all realistically, we shall undoubtedly be forced to overcome our prejudices against and dislikes of certain features and practices which displease us but which are undeniably a part of standard English. Without question, this will cause considerable pain and result in much wringing of hands. Nevertheless, if we set out on this course we may well find that fewer students will leave our classes with anxiety neuroses about their language and that more of them will be comfortable with it.

From Speech to Writing

I shall call the third language process *compensation.* I use this term to refer to ways in which the written language must necessarily make up for features of the spoken language which it does not signal adequately. These include stress, intonation, hesitation pauses, the possibilities of self-interruption and beginning over again. In written English this compensation takes the form of a greater regard for logic, a necessarily greater concern for the placement of modifying elements, a more frequent use of subordination as against coordination. This does not necessarily make of written English a medium superior to its spoken counterpart. It results in a different medium, a medium,

we might almost say, lacking one of the dimensions of the spoken language.

If in our teaching of writing, insistence upon the tightness of organization is presented in the light of this kind of understanding of the communication process, it will make sense to the student; it is likely to be more effective than a series of haphazardly presented rules.

Growth through Understanding Language Processes

Pattern extension is the last of the processes I shall present for your consideration. Under this head I include analogy, the creation of compounds and derivative forms, and, somewhat more loosely, such processes as functional change, back formation clipping, and word blending. An understanding of these and the way in which they operate has chiefly diagnostic value. It enables the teacher to understand what is back of some of the strange concoctions that her pupils produce from time to time. I realize that an explanation is not necessarily a cure, but it can lay the foundation for an interest in language and for a positive approach to a mastery of the language as well. The latter, I should like to repeat, is the most important ingredient in developing in the student a sense of comfort with the language, a sense of control of it as a medium rather than something which controls him.

I can best illustrate what I mean by a positive approach by giving an account of the school experience of one of my own children. Recently she wrote a review of the book entitled *The Silent World.* In it she had written the sentence, "You can expect the unordinary under water." This sentence was criticized for faulty diction on the ground that unordinary was not a word because, so the teacher said, it did not occur in the dictionary. Being a child of mine, she straightaway consulted the *Oxford English Dictionary* and discovered not only that the word was recorded there, but that it had been used in English as early as 1547 and as late as 1909. At this point, the teacher somewhat grudgingly withdrew her criticism. Unfortunately by making this a question of whether or not the expression was permitted by authority, the teacher simply challenged the child to pit one authority aginst the other. Consequently little or nothing of any value came out of this episode. Had the student been invited to develop for herself a synonymy of such formations as *unordinary, out of the ordinary, extraordinary,* and *unusual,* the result could have been positive rather than negative.

To conclude, what we must strive to develop is a generation of students who will approach language with sentiments and feelings other than those of anxiety and frustration, a generation of students who will not shrink from the pencil when asked to draft a statement about something or other and who can draft one which will express with clarity and precision what they want to say. A calm, reasoned, and sane attitude toward language can be one of the greatest forces in bringing this about. You, as custodians of the language, can be one of the most vital factors in developing this sanity.

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